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ABSTRACT

The distance teaching counseling program for mature students at Deakin University, Australia, is discussed, along with the extent to which adequate counseling is provided for the distance student in Australia and other countries. Completion of admission and enrollment procedures for new off-campus students between June and December in the year prior to their starting the course helps prepare Deakin University distance students. The first teaching material is sent 5-6 weeks before the on-campus counterpart of the class begins, and a counseling package provides the following materials: information on potential problems, available resources, a self-assessment exercise to review reasons for college study at Deaken University, and advice on study techniques. Students can also request information on the nature and content of units being offered. In addition, a Saturday workshop helps students explore in more detail some of the issues raised in the counseling package as well as other student concerns. Needs assessment suggests the following conclusions: a single session or workshop is not sufficient to deal effectively with student needs; returning or continuing in college is more difficult for women; and high-risk students need to be identified and receive special programing. (SW)

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COUNSELLING THE DISTANCE STUDENT:

FACT OR FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

Among tertiary institutions in Australia there has been a rapidly increasing interest in distance education. Of the 19 universities, five - Queensland, New England, Macquarie, Deakin and Murdoch - have extensive off campus programs whilst several other universities make provision for small numbers of students to undertake courses in this way. Some 20 colleges of advanced education have a major interest on this mode of education but more appear to be entering the field. In addition, there is a large group of Technical and Further Education students studying in the off campus mode. A number of universities and colleges have been engaged in serving the off campus student for many years and in so doing have provided access to tertiary education that would otherwise have been denied many. Similar motives are not always attributed to the newer institutions in the field within the broader context of institutions unable to meet their student projections and sensitive to doubts about their institutional viability.[1]

No doubt arguments about motivation can be pursued indefinitely and without resolution. What is more important is how well the educational needs of the off campus student are being met. Not only is the question relevant in terms of the quality both of the teaching materials provided and the guidance of the learning experience but also in terms of the support services available.

Perhaps a series of seminars or workshops or even a conference on support programs for off campus students is well overdue.

In this context it is of particular interest to explore the extent to which adequate counselling is provided for the distance student in tertiary instituions. Accordingly this paper will draw attention to some of the efforts made both in Australia and overseas. It will then describe the distance teaching system being developed by Deakin University and its attempts to meet the needs of students. Finally it will comment on the needs of the distance student as seen by a student counsellor and discuss the implications of these in relation to the support services that may be provided.

I. COUNSELLING PROVISION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

A very recent paper by Thornton and Mitchell entitled 'Counselling the Distance Learner: A Survey of Trends and Literature' has this to say about the provision of guidance counselling and advisory services:

> "Outside the traditional mode of higher education by contrast, the prevailing situation with regard to the provision of guidance, counselling and advisory services is open to the charge of culpable neglect and inertia. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of external studies programs where, with few notable exceptions, the counselling and information function has been an impoverished, depressed and often non existent element in a system of education which, in Australia at least, has remained one of the most underdeveloped and undernourished areas of educational endeavour,[2]

The writers go on to discuss the factors which they believe have produced this situation and then describe initiatives that are exceptions to the general state of affairs as they see them. One such is the learning consultant network established by the Regional Learning Service of Central New York in 1973 under the auspices of Syracuse University through which an independent educational counselling service

assists adult learners to find their way into and through available study programs. Elsewhere they note that some use is made by counselling by correspondence but restricted more to tutor comment than formal and sustained counselling by letter. Audio cassettes are used by some for counselling purposes and have advantages in that they are more personal, more complete and have a greater immediacy. Telephone counselling is receiving considerable attention and has greater advantages including more effective interaction and the possibility of group counselling by means of loud speaking telephones or conference calls.

Developments in Australia include the appointment of External Students Counsellor at Queensland University, Deaking University's Counselling Package for mature age students returning to study, Murdoch's three tier counselling system available to off campus students, and the Darling Downs system of regional counsellors and co-ordinators.

The Open University's provisions for counselling are of particular interest as that institution is concerned soley with the distance learner. It is not intended to describe this fully as such descriptions are available elsewhere. However, the following excerpt may be sufficient to indicate the Open University's philosophy in respect to counselling:

> "The nature of counselling and advisory services which the Open University offers its students and applicants is dictated by the fact that its students are learning at a distance, are adults and are not engaged in full-time study. In addition, a policy of open entry means that while some students come from a background of higher education, others have few or no previous qualifications. These factors require the University to try to provide an individual service to its applicants and students whenever possible. In pursuit of this aim students are allocated to Tutor-Counsellors, part time staff who are locally based and who have a continuing responsibility for the progress of individual students from their initial registration until graduation. These Tutor-Counsellors play a considerable part in determining the extent, nature and timing of the resources with which the university can support an individual student. Tuition for higher level specialist courses is normally provided by tutors at a greater distance, with the Tutor-Counsellors continuing to provide local generalist support. The Open University has set up a regional infra-structure of full time academic and administrative staff for the support, briefing, supervision and organisation of this local network of part time staff."[3]

II DISTANCE EDUCATION AT DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

The beginnings of Deakin University, developing as it did from a teacher training institution and an institute of technology, have been described elsewhere[4]. Suffice it to say that it is a regional university with some 1800 full time and 500 part time on campus students and, in 1979, approximately 2000 off campus students. Deakin's earliest thinking about distance teaching has been described[5] and further developed in a later paper by Gough[6]. In summary Deakin's distance education system could be characterised thus:

a. Course development

. interdisciplinary

. using course teams with academic, editorial, graphics and educational technology inputs

. producing multi media self instructional materials for use by both on and off campus students

. resulting in quality printed materials designed to last some four years

. with regular evaluation leading to minor revisions annually and major rewrites periodically.

b. Teaching courses

. using same staff to teach on and off campus students and distinguishing as little as possible between on and off campus students

. without requiring off campus students to attend campus, unless they wish

. using flexible assessment procedures including continuous assessment with rapid turn around of assignments as well as formal examinations in some courses.

. supported by central co-ordinating organisation

. with regional study centres, visiting or regional tutors, self help groups and weekend schools

. and developing counselling and advisory services regionally and centrally

It is worth noting that Deakin has consistently looked for ways of collaborating with other teaching institutions in order to extend the range of educational opportunities for students[7]. It may be worth commenting however that it has not made any attempt to extend this collaboration formally into the area of counselling.

What Deakin has done is to develop a counselling program designed specifically for mature age students[8]. Briefly the program is as follows:

1. The completion of admission and enrolment procedures for new off campus students between June and December in the year prior to their starting the course. This allows an acculturation period in which there is time for the student to organise his private life and prepare for the demands of study. In mid December final confirmation of enrolment was sent together with book lists and further information about the course. The first teaching material was sent in the second half of January thus giving the off campus student some five or six weeks advantage over his on campus counterpart.

2. A counselling package[9] was prepared and sent to applicants - in two mailings. The first mailing contained in an attractively printed format:

   a. Introductory material which alerted the student to the problems an off campus student might encounter, outlined the resources available to him and in particular identified the people who would be his initial major point of contact within the university. In essence it was regarded as a bridge building exercise between the student and the University.

   b. Next the applicant was helped to review his reasons for wanting to study at Deakin on the assumption that the better a student understands what is required of him and the surer he is that this is what he wants to do the more likely he is to succeed. Essentially this was to be an exercise in self analysis.

   c. The third section contained advice on study techniques so that the student would be able to begin study with some basic understanding of how to go about it. This section was designed to increase the student's level of confidence in his ability to handle university study.

   When this part of the package has been worked through applicants who wished to proceed wrote for the second part of the package which consisted of sample material designed to give some indication of the nature and content of the units being offered. Applicants were encouraged to work through this material, do the relevant reading and complete any self assessment exercises. Enrolment could then be completed by filling in the enrolment form and returning it with the general service fee to the University. Throughout this period the applicant was invited to make contact by letter or telephone or in person with relevant staff members. One of the aims of the package was that of building up in the student experience in interaction with both the materials and with university staff.

3. Saturday Workshops were then held in November to explore in more detail some of the issues raised in the counselling package together with any other issues of concern to students. Workshops were held in Melbourne, Geelong and Shepparton. These workshops were open only to the mature age special entry students although the counselling package was sent to all off campus applicants.

III. THE OFF CAMPUS STUDENT

Within this framework in what areas have students sought help, to what extent have they used the services provided and how adequate are the provisions made by the University?

a. Student Needs

New students face questions about their personal competence, about changing roles and role conflict, choice of courses, scheduling of time and assigning of priorities, effective study techniques and understanding 'the loneliness of the distance learner'. The counselling package and the orientation workshops are designed to provide some assistance with these issues.

What became clear through these workshops is that for many students a single session or workshop is not sufficient to resolve the problems. For one reason, many students are totally lacking in knowledge about the university system itself. Terminology that is commonplace to us is foreign to them. Semesters or terms, units, credits, assessment, degree programs and major studies are basic terms used to describe university courses but may need careful explanation. Similarly the administrative requirements of the institution hold no terror for the on campus student but to the student 'our there' may be more than daunting. Yet againstudents may not really have much idea of the intellectual skills or capacities required nor of the intellectual level required to be successful. Often their expectations of what is required will be inflated and this may be exacerbated by worries amongst older students about decreasing intellectual capacity with increasing age.

Clearly off campus students are demonstrating that they require

- reassurance about themselves
- information about the institution, tertiary studies, courses, staff and fellow students
- training in the approach to study and study techniques
- stimulating, supporting and strengthening motivation and commitment
- help with reassessing life styles, goals and role conflicts

It is not enough to expect that a single encounter will deal effectively with these issues for most students.

b. Student, Family and the Role of Women

Experience confirms what others have found, namely that for men returning to study or undertaking additional studies the difficulties are considerably less than in the case of women. It is accepted as part of his role and those within his immediate environment usually expect to modify their behaviour in order to fit in with his study requirements and to compensate for any existing responsibilities that he is no longer able to discharge. And to do so without complaint!

For the wife and mother it may be very different. Stephenson has noted that within Australian society 'any exercise of initiative or assertion of personal ambitions beyond marriage is a remarkably recent phenomenon and regarded with suspicion'[10]. Increasingly however dissatisfaction with their status and feelings that their potential has not been realised are reflected in comments such as 'I feel its my turn now' or 'I need something to fill the void, now my children no longer need me', or 'I notice that it is always the person with the university degree that other people listen to'.

The reaction of children and husband may range from marked hostility through indifference to enthusiastic support. Hostility makes it difficult and usually means that the family will brook no reduction in the level of service it has come to expect from the

wife and mother. Even worse it may lead to increased demands on her, reduced co-operation and the deliberate placing of obstacles in her way. Even the money she has to find for fees, books and travel while not amounting to a great deal may be made a source of conflict.

Suprisingly however enthusiastic support can sometimes be a difficulty, particularly when the women's motivation in studying is to achieve recognition as an intellectually competent individual capable of independent thought. One student expressed the height of such frustration saying 'Its no longer my course - its been taken over by my husband and daughter who both have degrees ... They tell me what to write and I feel guilty and rejecting when I don't take their advice!'

Within the husband and wife relationship each may contribute to the wife's problems as a student. In the wife it may be 'fear of success', a phenomenon encountered more frequently in women than in men[11]. Not only is academic success considered by many in Australian society as inappropriate for women but what is expected of the academically successful woman may impose unacceptable demands on her.[12] As one woman put it 'I'm going to withdraw because I know I can do well but too much is expected of you when you get a degree'. On the part of the husband it may well be resentment that his wife, in becoming a student, is rejecting her role as housewife and thereby implying that he is not able to provide for her needs materially or emotionally. A further fear expressed by husbands is 'that she might change and become aggressive or intractable'. For some it is simply that the wife may end up knowing more than the husband. These changes in family dynamics cannot be ignored.

This is all the more unfortunate when it is accepted that without the support of their husbands married women students can fulfil their obligations neither to themselves nor to their families[13].

c. Preventative Counselling: The High Risk Student

Following some measure of success with the use of the Counselling Package and the orientation workshops further efforts have been made in the field of prevention. A selection panel was established to identify students who might be expected to have difficulties with a university program. This reflects an acceptance by the university that if it admits intellectually capable but academically unqualified students to its programs it has a responsibility to maximise their possibiliy of success.

Students who were identified as being at risk were followed up by personal contact from the student counsellor who was herself a member of the selection panel. The students contacted included

- an applicant who had spent the whole of his adult life in a respirator
- a non English speaking migrant
- a woman due to have a baby early in 1st semester who wanted to do a full time program
- a student with chronic history of withdrawal.

Discussion with such students showed that they had insufficient appreciation of the commitment involved both in terms of time and energy and the cost of sustaining such commitment over a period of time. Intending students are often unable to anticipate the adjustments they will need to make when circumstances change as, for example, with a young mother whose baby progresses from sleeping 20 hours a day to becoming a wilful pedestrian who does not allow himself to be ignored.

The aim of the counsellor was to improve the informational context within which the student would make a decision and then to ensure, where possible, that the necessary supports were provided.

d. The Telephone

Because students are dispersed across the state, face to face contact with the counsellor is less readily available. It is also accepted that contact is important at the time the student needs it. A partial answer has been provided by installing a 'hot line' which operates 24 hours a day recording messages when used out of hours and providing a simple, efficient and relatively economical means for the student to contact the University.

The student counsellor has had a number of these calls referred to her. Most of them have involved crisis counselling with only a single telephone discussion although there may have been follow up in other ways. In several instances, telephone counselling has been continued through a sequence of calls.

Considerable exploration of the telephone as a communication medium in counselling is required.

e. Regional Counselling

It would be relatively easy to organise a series of visits to study centres so that students could consult the counsellor. The cost of doing so would be high both in terms of expense and time, not to mention wear and tear on the counsellor. More importantly, such visits are more likely to be scheduled at institutional convenience and in most cases would coincide only fortuituously with the crisis points in a students experience.

One centre serving a large number of students is the Melbourne Study Centre and it has been found that students utilize fully the opportunity to see a counsellor who visits once a fortnight. The frequency of these visits could be extended if there is a demonstrable need and scheduling of periodic visits to other study centres could be considered when numbers warrant.

CONCLUSION

In drawing these threads together and in an attempt to make some assessment of the place of counselling in distance teaching systems some observations may be appropriate.

1. It is not true that off campus students do not need the services of counsellors because they are older and have more life experience including often marriage, parenthood and vocational

attainment and because they are full members of a wider community in which they have access to the services provided by that community. Indeed for the older student, resuming the student role, sometimes after many years, will generate its own set of adjustment needs and difficulties for which counselling might be seen as desirable and necessary. The problems encountered by such students may be different but are nonetheless real.

2. It does appear that in comparison with the provision of counselling resources for on campus students, which is generally regarded by the professionals involved as less than adequate, such provision for off campus students is distinguished by its paucity.

3. A counselling model predicated on face to face counselling is not a sufficient basis for developing counselling in distance education systems. Effective interaction using other communication technologies must be developed.

4. The off campus student has to take his counselling where he can find it. Sometimes from resources in his own community, often from those people with whomhe has established contact within the university, for example, tutors and administrators. If counsellors are to be used by off campus students effort must be invested in building bridges between the counselling service and the off campus student, an effort directed not only at increasing the awareness of students but also of staff who are in a position to refer students.

5. Within distance teaching systems there is an emerging emphasis on the quality of teaching materials not only in terms of their content but of their presentation. It would be the judgement of some that the same concern for improving the teaching of the course at a distance has not yet been demonstrated. Both are of critical importance in such systems and within the latter there is need to consider the nature, extent and quality of support services needed by a student including provision for counselling.

Finally, distance teaching systems run the inevitable risk of becoming complex and impersonal systems of rules, regulations and requirements divested of any personal touch. The provision of counselling resources is one way of personalising and humanising the system not only by serving the student but by having an impact on the design of the system.

Perhaps a fair conclusion in this paper may be to say that counselling the distance student is an issue still largely ignored by many institutions, has attained a fictional status in some and is fact in all too few.

FOOTNOTES

1. Notwithstanding such scepticism there are good reasons for extending efforts in distance education including those given in the Open University Interim Report, 1976, p. 7.

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